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Caesar

The Life of a Colossus

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Published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson

Extract

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I

CAESAR'S WORLD

'For, when Rome was freed of the fear of Carthage, and her rival in empire was out of her way, the path of virtue was abandoned for that of corruption, not gradually, but in headlong course. The older discipline was discarded to give place to the new. The state passed from vigilance to slumber, from the pursuit of arms to the pursuit of pleasure, from activity to idleness.'
– *Velleius Paterculus, early first century* AD.[1]

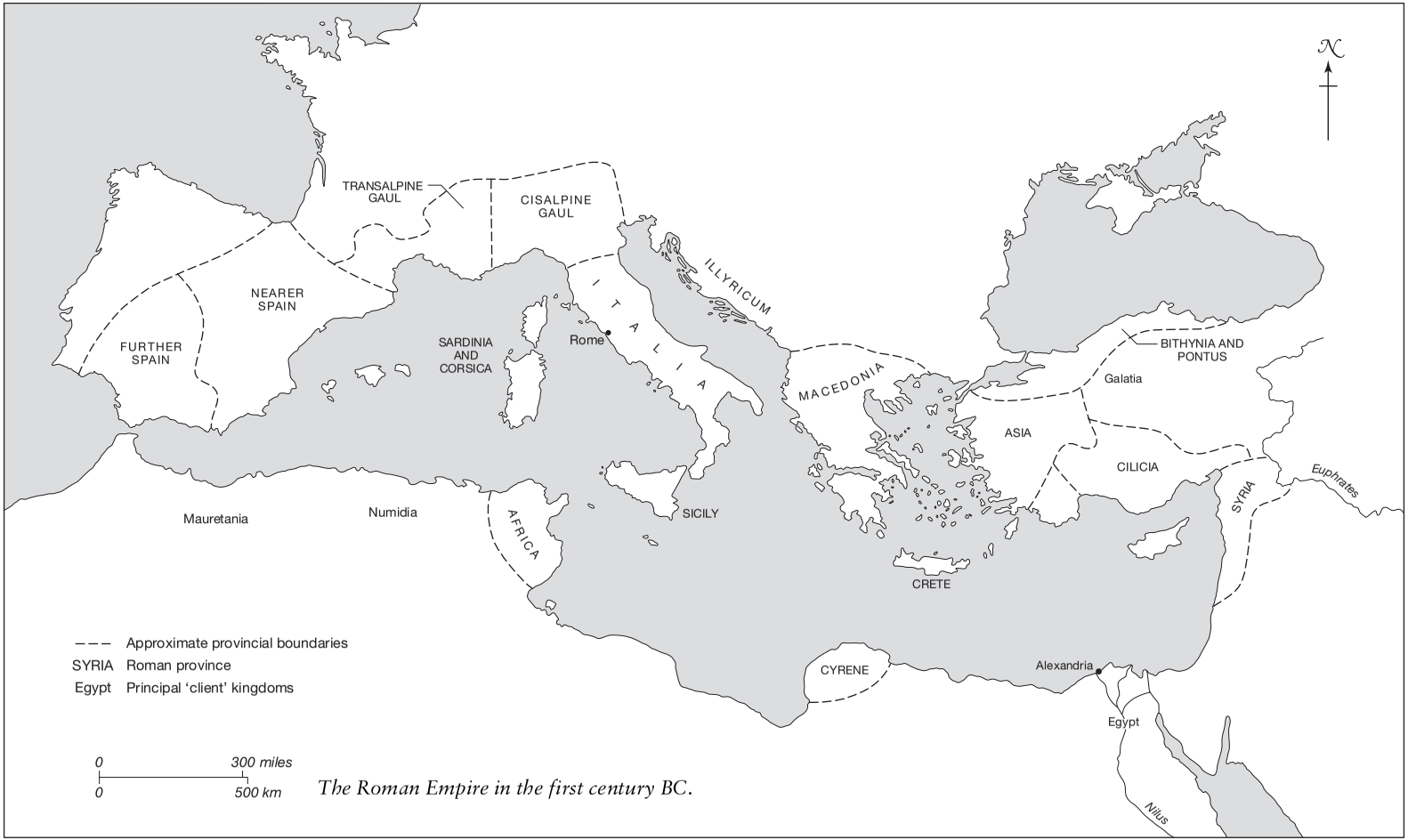
'The Republic is nothing, merely a name without body or shape.'
– *Julius Caesar.*[2]

By the end of the second century BC the Roman Republic was the only great power left in the Mediterranean world. Carthage, the Phoenician colony whose trading empire had dominated the West for so long, had been razed to the ground by the legions in 146 BC. At almost the same time, Alexander the Great's homeland of Macedonia became a Roman province. The other major kingdoms that had emerged when Alexander's generals had torn apart his vast but short-lived empire had already been humbled and had dwindled to shadows of their former might. Many of the lands in and around the Mediterranean – the entire Italian Peninsula, southern Gaul, Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica, Macedonia and part of Illyricum, Asia Minor, much of Spain and a corner of North Africa – were directly ruled by the Romans. Elsewhere Rome's power was acknowledged, however grudgingly, or at the very least feared. None of the kingdoms, tribes or states in contact with the Romans could match their power and there was no real prospect of their uniting in opposition. In 100 BC Rome was hugely strong and very rich and there was nothing to suggest that this would change. With hindsight, we know that Rome would in fact grow even stronger and richer, and within little more than a century would have conquered the bulk of an empire that would endure for five centuries.

Rome's rise from a purely Italian power to Mediterranean superpower had been rapid, shockingly so to the Greek-speaking world, which had in the past scarcely regarded this particular group of western barbarians. The struggle with Carthage had lasted over a century and involved massive losses, whereas the defeat of the Hellenistic powers had taken half the time and been achieved at trifling cost. A generation before Caesar's birth, the Greek historian Polybius had written a *Universal History* with the express purpose of explaining just how Rome's dominance had been achieved. He had himself witnessed the closing stages of the process, having fought against the Romans in the Third Macedonian War (172–167 BC), then gone to Rome as a hostage, living in the household of a Roman nobleman and accompanying him on campaign to witness the destruction of Carthage. Although he paid attention to the effectiveness of the Roman military system, Polybius believed that Rome's success rested far more on its political system. For him the Republic's constitution, which was carefully balanced to prevent any one individual or section of society from gaining overwhelming control, granted Rome freedom from the frequent revolution and civil strife that had plagued most Greek city-states. Internally stable, the Roman Republic was able to devote itself to waging war on a scale and with a relentlessness unmatched by any rival. It is doubtful that any other contemporary state could have survived the catastrophic losses and devastation inflicted by Hannibal, and still gone on to win the war.[3]

Caesar was born into a Republic that was some four centuries old and had proved itself in Rome's steady rise. Rome itself would go on to even greater power, but the Republican system was nearing an end. In his own lifetime Caesar would see the Republic torn apart by civil wars – conflicts in which he himself was to play a leading role. Some Romans felt that the system had not outlived Caesar, many naming him as its principal assassin. None doubted that the Republic was no more than a memory by the time that Caesar's adopted son Augustus had made himself Rome's first emperor. For all its earlier, long-term success, the Roman Republic was nearing the end of its life by the close of the second century BC with some signs that not everything was functioning properly.

In 105 BC a group of migrating Germanic tribes called the Cimbri and Teutones had smashed an exceptionally large Roman army at Arausio (modern Orange in southern France). The casualties from this battle rivalled those of Cannae in 216 BC, when Hannibal had massacred almost 50,000 Roman and allied soldiers in a single day. It was the latest and worst of a string of defeats inflicted by these barbarians, who had been provoked into



The Roman Empire in the first century BC.

fighting by the first Roman commander to encounter them back in 113 BC. The Cimbri and Teutones were peoples on the move in search of new land, not a professional army engaged in an all-out war. In battle their warriors were terrifying in appearance and individually brave, but they lacked discipline. At a strategic level the tribes were not guided by rigid objectives. After Arausio they wandered off towards Spain, not returning to invade Italy for several years. This temporary relief did little to reduce the widespread panic at Rome, fuelled by folk memories of the sack of the city in 390 BC by large, fair complexioned and savage warriors – in that case Gauls rather than Germans – but the Romans retained a deep-seated fear of all northern barbarians. There was widespread criticism of the incompetent aristocratic generals who had presided over the recent disasters. Instead they insisted that the war against the tribes must now be entrusted to Caius Marius, who had just won a victory in Numidia, ending a war that had also initially been characterised by corruption and ineptitude in high places. Marius was married to Caesar's aunt and was the first of his family to enter politics, and had already achieved much by being elected as one of the two consuls for 107 BC. The consuls were the senior executive officers of the Republic, charged with the most important civil responsibilities or military commands for the twelve months during which they held office. Ten years were supposed to elapse before a man was permitted to hold a second consulship, but Marius was voted into the office for five consecutive years from 104 to 100 BC. This was both unprecedented and of dubious legality, but did have the desired result, as he defeated the Teutones in 102 BC and the Cimbri in the following year.[4]

Marius' successive consulships violated a fundamental principle of Roman public life, but they could be interpreted as a necessary expedient to guide the State through a time of crisis. In the past the Republic had demonstrated a degree of flexibility, which had helped the Romans to deal with other emergencies. Far more disturbing was the recent tendency for political disputes to turn violent. In the autumn of 100 BC, a senator called Memmius, who had just been elected to the consulship for the following year, was beaten to death in the Forum by the henchmen of one of the unsuccessful candidates. This man, Caius Servilius Glaucia, along with his associate Lucius Appuleius Saturninus had employed threats and mob violence before to force through their legislation. They were widely believed to have arranged the murder of another of their rivals in the previous year. Memmius' lynching was blatant and prompted a swift backlash. Marius, who up until this point had been content to use Saturninus for his own purposes, now turned against him

and responded to the Senate's call for him to save the Republic. Arming his supporters, he blockaded Saturninus and Glaucia's partisans on the Capitoline Hill, and soon forced them to surrender. Marius may have promised the radicals their lives, but the general mood was less inclined to lenience. Most of the captives were shut in the Senate House when a crowd mobbed the building. Some climbed onto the roof and started tearing off the tiles, hurling the heavy projectiles down into the interior until all the prisoners had been killed. To protect the Republic, normal law had been suspended and violence was crushed by greater violence. It was a far cry from the, admittedly idealised, picture of the perfectly balanced constitution presented by Polybius, although even he had hinted that Rome's internal stability might not always endure. To understand Caesar's story we must first look at the nature of the Roman Republic, both in theory and in the changing practice of the closing decades of the second century BC.[5]

THE REPUBLIC

Tradition maintained that Rome had been founded in 753 BC. For the Romans this was Year One and subsequent events were formally dated as so many years from the 'foundation of the city' (*ab urbe condita*). The archaeological evidence for the origins of Rome is less clear-cut, since it is difficult to judge when the small communities dotted around the hills of what would become Rome merged into a single city. Few records were preserved from the earliest periods and there were many things that even the Romans did not know with certainty by the time they began to write histories at the beginning of the second century BC. The tales of the City's early days probably contain some measure of truth, but it is all but impossible to verify individuals and particular incidents. Clearly, Rome was first ruled by kings, although it is hard to know whether any of the seven individual monarchs recorded in tradition were actual figures. Near the end of the sixth century BC – the traditional date of 509 BC may well be accurate – internal upheaval resulted in the monarchy being replaced by a republic.

The political system of the Roman Republic evolved gradually over many years and was never rigidly fixed. Resembling more modern Britain than the United States of America, Rome did not have a written constitution, but a patchwork of legislation, precedent and tradition. The expression *res publica*, from which we have derived our word republic, literally means 'the public thing' and can perhaps best be translated as 'the State' or the 'body

politic'. The vagueness ensured that it meant different things to different people. Caesar would later dismiss it as an empty phrase.[6] The looseness of the system permitted considerable flexibility, which for centuries proved a source of strength. At the same time its very nature ensured that any new precedent or law, whether good or bad, could easily modify forever the way that things were done. At the heart of the system was the desire to prevent any one individual from gaining too much permanent power. Fear of a revival of monarchic rule was widespread and most deeply entrenched among the aristocracy, who monopolised high office. Therefore power within the Republic was vested in a number of different institutions, the most important of which were the magistrates, the Senate and the Popular Assemblies.

Magistrates had considerable power, the most senior formally holding *imperium*, the right to command troops and dispense justice, but this was essentially temporary and lasted only for the twelve months of office. It was also limited by the equal power of colleagues holding the same office. There were two consuls each year and six praetors holding the next most important magistracy. A man could not seek re-election to the same post until a ten-year interval had elapsed, nor could he stand in the first place until he had reached the age of thirty-nine for the praetorship and forty-two for the consulship. There was no division between political and military power and the magistrates performed military or civil tasks as necessary. The most important duties and military commands went to the consuls, the lesser to the praetors. Most senior magistrates were sent out to govern a province during their year of office. The Senate was able to extend a consul or praetor's *imperium* as a pro-magistrate – proconsul or propraetor respectively – on an annual basis. This was frequently necessary to provide the Republic with the number of provincial governors needed to control a large empire, but it did not alter the essentially temporary nature of power. An extension of more than two years was extremely rare. Therefore, while the offices themselves wielded great power, the individual consuls and other magistrates changed every year.

In contrast the Senate's importance was based less on its formal functions than its sheer permanence. It consisted of around 300 senators and met when summoned by a magistrate, usually a consul when one was present. Senators were not elected, but enrolled – and very occasionally expelled – in the Senate by the two censors, who every five years carried out a census of Roman citizens. It was expected that these would enrol anyone elected to a magistracy since the last census, although there was no legal obligation to do this. However, there were comparatively few offices to hold, and many senators, perhaps half, had

never been elected to a magistracy. Senators had to belong to the equestrian order, the wealthiest property-holding class listed in the census. Their name, *equites* or 'knights', derived from their traditional role as cavalrymen in the Roman army. However, the vast majority of equestrians never sought to enter public life and the Senate tended to be drawn from an informal inner elite within the class. Wealthy, and given a prominent role in guiding the State, they were therefore men who had a strong vested interest in preserving the Republic. Debates were dominated by the ex-magistrates, for procedure dictated that the former consuls be asked their opinion first, followed by the former praetors and so on down to the most junior posts. Individuals who had served the Republic in a prominent position possessed huge influence or *auctoritas* *(see p. 524)* and the collective prestige of the Senate as a body was based to a large extent on the inclusion of such men. The Senate did not have the power to legislate, but the decrees resulting from its debates went to the Popular Assemblies for approval with a very strong recommendation. It also acted as an advisory council for the magistrates when these were in Rome, decided which provinces would be available for each year, and could grant *imperium* as a pro-magistrate. In addition, it was the Senate that received foreign embassies and despatched ambassadors, and also sent commissioners to oversee administrative arrangements in the provinces, giving it a critical role in shaping foreign affairs.

The various voting assemblies of the Roman people possessed considerable power within the Republic, but had little or no scope for independent action. They elected all magistrates, passed laws and had formally to ratify declarations of war and the peace treaties concluding a conflict. All adult male citizens were able to vote if they were present, but their votes were not all of equal value. In the *Comitia Centuriata*, which elected the consuls and had a number of other important functions, the people were divided into voting units based upon their property as registered in the most recent census. Its structure had its origins in the organisation of the archaic Roman army, where the wealthiest were best able to afford the expensive equipment required to fight in the more conspicuous and dangerous roles. Inevitably there were fewer members in the most senior voting units or centuries, simply because there were fewer rich than poor. Each century's vote was supposed to carry equal weight, but those of the wealthier classes voted first and it was often the case that a decision had already been reached before the poorest centuries had had their say. Other assemblies were based on tribal divisions, again determined by the census, and here the inequalities were similarly great if of a slightly different character. Each tribe voted according to a majority decision of those members present. However, the urban tribes,

which included many of Rome's poor, usually contained on the day of any vote far more citizens than the rural tribes, where only the wealthy members were likely to have travelled to Rome. Therefore in most respects the opinion of the more prosperous citizens had a far greater impact on the outcome of all votes than that of the more numerous poor. None of these assemblies provided an opportunity for debate. Instead they simply chose from a list of candidates or voted for or against a particular proposal. Assemblies were summoned by a magistrate, who presided over them and dictated their business. Compared to the Assembly of Athens in the later fifth century BC, the democratic elements within the Roman system might seem tightly controlled, but that does not mean that they were unimportant. The outcome of voting, particularly in elections, remained unpredictable.

Only those registered as equestrians in the highest property class in the census were eligible for a political career. Reaching the magistracies depended on winning favour with the electorate. At Rome there was nothing even vaguely resembling modern political parties – although given the stifling impact of these, this may well have made it more rather than less democratic than many countries today – and each candidate for office competed as an individual. Only rarely did they advocate specific policies, although commenting on issues of current importance was more common. In the main voters looked more for a capable individual who once elected could do whatever the State required. Past deeds stood as proof of ability, but where these were lacking, especially at the early stages of a career, a candidate paraded the achievements of earlier generations of his family. The Romans believed strongly that families possessed clear character traits and it was assumed that a man whose father and grandfather had fought successful wars against Rome's foes would prove similarly capable himself. Aristocratic families took great pains to advertise the deeds of their members, past and present, so that their names sparked recognition amongst the voters. The combination of their fame and wealth allowed a comparatively small number of families to dominate the ranks of the magistracies and, in particular, the consulship. Even so, it was never impossible for a man, even one who was the first of his family to enter the Senate, to become consul. Someone who achieved this feat was known as a 'new man' (*novus homo*). Marius, with his unprecedented string of consulships, was the greatest of these, and for most 'new men' a single term was a sufficiently difficult achievement. Politics was highly competitive and even members of established families needed to work to maintain their advantage. The number of each college of magistrates declined with seniority, so that the struggle for office became even harder as

a man progressed up the ladder. By simple arithmetic, only one-third of the six praetors elected each year could hope to become consul. This fierce competitiveness ensured that long-term political groupings were rare, and permanent parties unimaginable, for no one could share a magistracy.

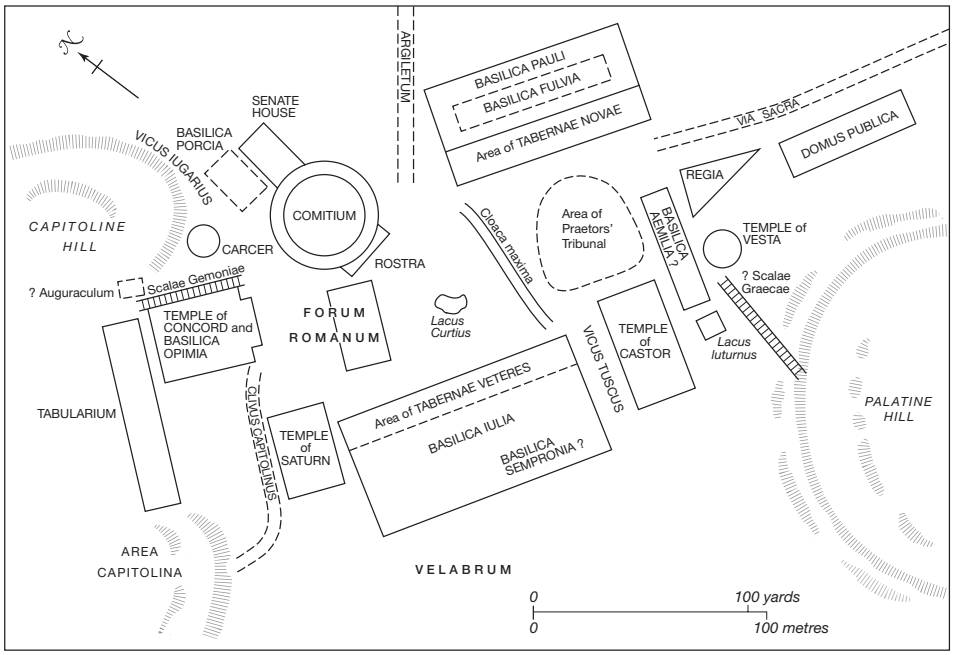
In many ways the system worked well, providing the Republic each year with a new crop of magistrates, all eager to do great deeds on Rome's behalf before their twelve months of office expired. The formal power of *imperium* lasted only for this time, but a man's successes would greatly enhance his *auctoritas*. Like so many Roman concepts this term is hard to translate in a single English word, for it combined authority, reputation and influence with sheer importance or status. *Auctoritas* endured after an office was laid down, though it could be diminished by a man's subsequent behaviour or eclipsed by that of other senators. It determined how often and how early a man's opinion would be sought by the magistrate presiding over a meeting of the Senate, and the weight his view would carry with others. *Auctoritas* existed only when it was acknowledged by others, but men were aware of their status and could at times use it bluntly. In 90 BC the distinguished former consul and censor, and current senior senator (*princeps senatus*), Marcus Aemilius Scaurus was accused of taking bribes from a hostile king. His prosecutor was the undistinguished Quintus Varius Severus, who, although a Roman, had been born in the city of Sucro in Spain. As the key to his defence, Scaurus turned to the court and the watching crowd and asked a simple question. 'Varius Severus of Sucro claims that Aemilius Scaurus, seduced by a royal bribe, betrayed the *imperium* of the Roman people; Aemilius Scaurus denies the charge. Which of the two would you rather believe?' In reply Varius was jeered from the court and the charge dropped.[7]

Competition did not stop when a man won the consulship. His subsequent status depended on how well he performed in the office in comparison with other consuls. Leading an army to victory over an enemy of the Republic was a great achievement, especially if it was acknowledged by the award of a triumph on his return to Rome. In this ceremony the victor rode in a chariot through the centre of the city as part of a procession including his captives, the spoils won and other symbols of success, as well as his own soldiers parading in their finest equipment. The general was dressed in the regalia of Rome's most important deity, Jupiter Optimus Maximus, even to the extent of having his face painted red to resemble the old terracotta statues of the god. Behind him stood a slave holding the victor's laurel wreath over the general's head, but also whispering a reminder that he was a mortal. It

was a great honour, commemorated for ever by hanging laurel wreaths (or carving their likeness) in the porch of a man's house. Such an achievement was highly valued, but it was also compared to the victories of other senators. It was important to have won better and greater battles over stronger or more exotic enemies for this enhanced a man's *auctoritas* in relation to other former generals. Most men had won and completed their first consulship by the time they were in their mid forties, and could expect to live on and remain active in the Senate for decades. Their continued prominence in public life depended on their *auctoritas*, and in time might further add to this. Competition was at the heart of Roman public life, senators struggling throughout their careers to win fame and influence for themselves, and prevent others from acquiring too much of the same things. The annual election of new magistrates and the restrictions on office-holding helped to provide many senators with the chance to serve the Republic in a distinguished capacity, and prevented any one individual from establishing a monopoly of glory and influence. All aristocrats wanted to excel, but their deepest fear was always that someone else would surpass all rivals by too great a margin and win a more permanent pre-eminence, raising the spectre of monarchy. Too much success for an individual reduced the number of honours available for everyone else to contest.

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Although the Republic had become the great power of the Mediterranean world by the end of the second century BC, Rome itself remained the focus of all aspects of political life. There, and only there, could the Senate meet, courts convene or Popular Assemblies gather to elect magistrates or pass legislation. By 100 BC Rome was the largest city in the known world, dwarfing even its nearest rivals such as Alexandria. By the close of the first century BC its population may well have been around the million mark, and even in 100 BC there were certainly several hundred thousand people living there, perhaps half a million or more. We lack the evidence to be more precise, but these numbers at least give some sense of the order of magnitude. Huge though the population was, in an age before any form of transport faster than a man could walk or ride, Rome did not sprawl over as wide an area as more modern cities. Housing, especially in the poorer areas, was very densely packed. Yet at the heart of Rome in every sense was the open space of the Forum. This was a place of commerce, from the fashionable shops, which bordered on its great buildings and provided the luxuries that were the prize of empire, to the representatives of the big merchant companies and grain



The City of Rome – central area, Forum etc. (after CAH² ix (1994) p.370). Some of the details are conjectural.

suppliers. It was also the place of law and justice, where the courts convened, advocates presented their cases and juries gave their verdict, all in open view. Through the Forum ran the Sacra Via, the route of triumphal processions. More than anything else, it was in and around the Forum that the public life of the Republic was conducted. Magistrates, such as the tribunes, aediles and praetors, had set places in the Forum where they sat to conduct business. When the Senate met it was with very rare exceptions in a building on the edge of the Forum, either the Senate House (Curia) or one of the great temples. Outside the Senate House was the Speakers Platform or Rostra, whose name was derived from its decoration with the prows of enemy warships during the wars with Carthage. From the Rostra speeches were made to informal meetings of the Roman people as magistrates and prominent men sought to persuade them to vote for or against a bill, or to favour someone at an election. At the command of a suitable magistrate, the same crowd of Romans could be told to convene as an Assembly of tribes (either the *Concilium Plebis* or *Comitia Tributa*) and pass legislation. Other than for elections, this almost always occurred in the Forum. In so many ways the Forum was the beating heart of Rome.[8]

THE PROFITS AND THE PRICE OF EMPIRE

The Roman Republic was frequently at war, for long periods virtually on an annual basis. Frequent war-making was not unusual in the ancient world, where states rarely needed much more reason to attack their neighbours than a belief that they were vulnerable. The great period of Classical Greek culture, with its flourishing arts, literature and philosophy, had come at a period when warfare between the Greek city-states was endemic. Yet from early on in its history Rome's war-making was distinctive in character, not simply because it was so successful, but through its talent for consolidating success on a permanent basis, as defeated enemies were absorbed and turned into reliable allies. By the beginning of the third century BC virtually all of the Italian Peninsula had come under Roman control. Within this territory some communities had been granted Roman citizenship and these, in addition to the colonies planted on conquered land, allowed the number of Roman citizens to grow in size far beyond the populations of other city-states. Other peoples were granted Latin status, conveying lesser, though still significant privileges, while the remainder were simply allies or *socii*. Comparatively early on, both Roman and Latin status had lost any real association with particular ethnic or even linguistic groups, and had become primarily legal distinctions. Over time, communities not granted such privileges could hope to gain them, progressing by stages from Latin rights to citizenship without the vote, and finally to full Roman citizenship. Each community was tied to Rome by a specific treaty, which made clear both its rights and obligations. Even more obvious was the fundamental fact that Rome was the superior partner in any such agreement and that this was not a settlement between equals. The most common obligation of all types of ally, including the Latins, was to supply Rome with men and resources in time of war. At least half of any Roman army invariably consisted of allied soldiers. In this way the defeated enemies of the past helped to win the wars of the present. Apart from confirming their loyalty to Rome in this way, the allied communities were also allowed a small, but significant, share in the profits of warfare. Since Roman war-making was so frequent – and some scholars have even suggested that the Republic needed to go to war to remind her allies of their obligations – there were plenty of opportunities for both service and profit.[9]

In 264 BC the Romans sent an army outside Italy for the first time, provoking the long conflict with the Carthaginians, who were of Phoenician origin, hence the Roman name of *Poeni* (Punic). The First Punic War

(264–241 BC) brought Rome its first overseas province in Sicily, to which was added Sardinia in the conflict's immediate aftermath. The Second Punic War (218–201 BC) resulted in a permanent Roman presence in Spain and involvement in Macedonia. The Republic's huge reserves of citizen and allied manpower and the willingness to absorb staggeringly high losses were major factors in securing the victory over Carthage. These conflicts also accustomed the Romans to despatching and supplying armies very far afield, something that was made possible by the creation of a large navy during the First Punic War. The Republic became used to waging war in several widely different theatres simultaneously. In the early decades of the second century BC, Rome defeated Macedonia and the Seleucid Empire. These, along with the Ptolemies of Egypt, were the most powerful of the Hellenistic kingdoms to emerge from the wreck of Alexander the Great's empire. The destruction of both Carthage and Corinth at the hands of Roman armies in 146 BC symbolised Roman dominance over the older powers of the Mediterranean world. More provinces were established in Macedonia and Africa, while elsewhere the conquest of the Po Valley was completed and a presence in Illyricum reinforced. Near the end of the century Transalpine Gaul (modern Provence in southern France) was conquered, establishing a Roman controlled land link with the provinces in Spain, just as Illyricum provided a connection with Macedonia. Soon Roman roads would be constructed linking one province to another in a monumental but highly practical way. Around the same time, the wealthy province of Asia was acquired. The link between Rome and her overseas provinces was at this time far less intimate than the bonds with the peoples of Italy, and there was no question as yet of widespread grants of Latin or Roman status to the indigenous populations. Communities in the provinces often provided troops to serve with the Roman army, but this was not their most important obligation, which took the form of regular tribute or taxation.

Many Romans benefited greatly from overseas expansion. For the aristocracy it provided plentiful opportunities to win glory during their magistracies by fighting a war. Campaigns against the tribal peoples in Spain, Gaul, Illyricum and Thrace were frequent. Wars with the famous states of the Hellenistic world occurred less often but were far more spectacular. With warfare so frequent, competition amongst senators focused on having won a bigger or more dangerous war than anyone else, and the honour of being the first to defeat a people was equally valued. Along with glory came great riches from plunder and the sale of captives as slaves. Some of this wealth went to the Republic, and some to the men serving in the

army, but since greater shares went to the more senior ranks, it was the commanders more than anyone else who benefited. Victories won in the eastern Mediterranean were especially lucrative, and during the second century BC a succession of generals returned from such wars to celebrate more lavish and more spectacular triumphs than had ever been seen before. It was at this period that the city of Rome began to be rebuilt in a far more spectacular form as successful commanders used some of their spoils to construct grand temples and other public buildings as permanent reminders of their achievements. Competition for fame and influence continued to dominate public life, but it was becoming an increasingly expensive business as some men brought back massive fortunes from their victories. Senators from families who had not managed to win commands during the most profitable campaigns had increasing difficulty maintaining the costs of a political career. The gap between the richest and poorest senators steadily widened, reducing the number of men able to compete for the highest magistracies and commands.

It was not only senators who profited from the creation of the empire, but in general it was the wealthy who did best in the new conditions. The Republic did not create an extensive bureaucratic machine to administer the provinces, so that governors had only a small number of officials supplemented by members of their own households with which to govern. As a result, much day-to-day business was left to the local communities and a good deal was carried out by private companies controlled by wealthy Romans. These men were usually members of the equestrian order, for senators themselves were forbidden by law from undertaking such contracts. (This was supposed to prevent business interests from influencing the opinions they expressed in the Senate. However, many may have covertly invested money in companies run openly by equestrians.) Companies headed by such men bid for the right to collect taxes in a region, to sell war captives and other plunder, or to undertake massive contracts supplying the army with food and equipment. They were known as the *publicani* – the publicans of the King James Bible – for undertaking such tasks required by the Republic, but their primary motive was profit and not public service. Once a company had agreed to pay the Treasury a set sum for the right to collect the taxes in a particular region or province, it was therefore necessary for them to collect more than this from the provincials. The company's agents at all levels were inclined to take a cut of the profits, and inevitably the amount actually taken from the population of the province was often substantially higher than the sum received by the Treasury. Yet in the main the Republic was satisfied with

this arrangement and resentment on the part of the provincials could, if necessary, be met by the force of the army. Apart from the *publicani*, many other Romans and their agents were active in business in the provinces. Merely being a Roman – and most Italians were taken for Romans by other races – gave merchants (*negotiatores*) considerable advantages, simply through association with the imperial power. The more influential men – once again usually the wealthiest or their representatives – were often able to draw on more direct aid from provincial governors. The activities of traders rarely feature other than peripherally in our ancient sources, but it is important not to underestimate their numbers or the scale of their operations. Such men profited greatly from Roman imperialism, even if it seems extremely unlikely that they had much influence on the decision-making process that directed the Republic's foreign affairs.[10]

Over the generations, an exceptionally high proportion of Roman men served in the army. Not until the government in Revolutionary France introduced mass conscription did a state of comparable size mobilise so much of its manpower over so long a period of time. Until the middle of the second century BC there appears to have been little popular resistance to this, and most men willingly undertook their military duties. For some active service was very attractive, in spite of the extremely brutal discipline imposed on the legions, for there was every prospect of plunder and winning honours. The Romans were also fiercely patriotic and valued this demonstration of their commitment to the Republic. The army recruited from the propertied classes, for each soldier was expected to provide himself with the necessary equipment to serve as a horseman for the very wealthy, a heavy infantryman for the majority, or a light infantryman for the poorer and younger recruits. The heart of the legions consisted of farmers, for land remained the most common form of property. Service lasted until the legion was disbanded, which often occurred at the end of a war. In the early days of the Republic, a spell in the army may well have taken no more than a few weeks, or at most months, for the foe was usually close by and the fighting small in scale and brief in duration. Ideally it allowed the farmer-soldier to win a quick victory and then return home in time to harvest his own fields. As Rome expanded, wars were fought further and further away and tended to last longer. During the Punic Wars tens of thousands of Romans were away from their homes for years. A number of overseas provinces demanded permanent garrisons, so that men unfortunate enough to be posted to somewhere like Spain often had to undergo five or ten years' continuous service. In their absence their own small farms risked falling into ruin, their families into

destitution. The situation was worsened as the minimum property qualification was lowered to provide more manpower, since such recruits inevitably lived that much closer to the poverty line. Prolonged military service ruined many small farmers, and the loss of their land meant that such men would in future lack sufficient property to make them eligible for call up to the legions. Concern grew from the middle of the second century BC that the number of citizens liable for the army was in terminal decline.

The difficulties of many small farmers occurred at the same time as other factors were reshaping Italian agriculture. The profits of expansion brought fabulous wealth to many senators and equestrians. Such men invested a good deal of their fortunes in huge landed estates, often absorbing land that had formerly been divided into many smallholdings. Such estates (*latifundia*) were invariably worked by a servile labour force, since frequent war ensured that slaves were both plentiful and cheap. The size of a man's landholdings, the number of slaves who worked them and the lavishness of the villas built for when the owner chose to visit were all new ways in which men could compete in displaying their fabulous riches. In more practical terms, large estates could be devoted to commercial farming, which provided a steady, low-risk profit. In many respects it was a vicious circle, as repeated wars in distant provinces took more citizen farmers away from their land and often left them and their families in penury, while the same conflicts further enriched the elite of society and provided them with the means to create more big *latifundia*. It has proved very difficult archaeologically to quantify the shifts in farming patterns in Italy during the period, and in some areas at least it seems that small-scale farming continued. Nevertheless, significant change clearly did occur over wide areas, and it is certain that the Romans themselves perceived this to be a serious problem.[11]

POLITICS AND BLOODSHED

In 133 BC Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus, one of the ten annually elected tribunes of the plebs, launched an ambitious reform programme aimed at dealing with this very problem. The tribunes differed from other magistrates in that they had no role outside Rome itself. Originally the office had been created to provide the people with some protection against the abuse of power by senior magistrates, but by this time it was essentially just another step in a normal career path. Tiberius was in his early thirties, from a highly distinguished family – his father had been censor and twice consul – and was

expected to go far. In his tribunate he focused on the public land (*ager publicus*) confiscated over the centuries from defeated Italian enemies. In both law and theory this was supposed to have been shared out in comparatively small lots amongst many citizens, but in practice large swathes had been absorbed into *latifundia*. The tribune passed a law confirming the legal limit of public land each individual was permitted to occupy, and redistributing the rest to poor citizens, thus raising these to the property class eligible for military service. Some senators supported Gracchus, but many more stood to lose directly from the confiscation of improperly held public land, as did many influential equestrians. Unable to secure approval for his law in the Senate, Tiberius violated tradition by taking it directly to the Popular Assembly. When a colleague in the tribunate tried to stop proceedings by imposing his veto, Gracchus organised a vote and had the man deposed from office. This may or may not have been legal, since in theory the people could legislate on anything, but it struck at the very heart of the Republican system by challenging the assumption that all magistrates of the same rank were equal.

Some senators who may have sympathised with the aims of Gracchus' legislation became worried that the tribune's ambitions had more to do with personal dominance than altruistic reform, for Tiberius stood to gain vast prestige and *auctoritas* if he was successful in improving the lot of so many citizens. The fear grew that he was aiming at something even more spectacular than the very successful career expected for a man of his background. That Tiberius, his father-in-law and his younger brother Caius were the three commissioners appointed to oversee the distribution of land raised more hackles by giving them so much patronage. Some began to accuse him of seeking *regnum*, the permanent power of a monarch. The final straw came when Tiberius, claiming the need to ensure that his laws were not immediately repealed, stood for election as tribune for 132 BC. His success was not certain, since by the very nature of his reforms many of the citizens most indebted to him had been settled on farms too far from Rome for them to attend an election. However, emotions spilled over when the consul presiding over the Senate refused to take action against the tribune. A group of angry senators led by Tiberius' cousin, Scipio Nasica, stormed out of the meeting and lynched the tribune and many of his supporters. Gracchus had his head staved in with a chair leg. His body, along with those of many of his supporters, was thrown into the Tiber.

This was the first time that political disputes had ended in widespread and fatal violence, and Rome was left in a state of shock. (A few stories of the

early years of the Republic told of demagogues or other men who had threatened the State being lynched, but these had long been consigned to ancient history in the Roman mind.) In the aftermath of the riot much of Tiberius' legislation remained in force, even as some of his surviving supporters came under attack. The tribune's brother Caius was serving with the army in Spain at the time and on his eventual return to Rome was permitted to continue his career. Embittered by the fate of Tiberius, Caius was still in his early twenties and it was not until he was elected to the tribunate in 123 BC that he embarked upon his own series of reforms, which were far more radical and wide ranging than those of his brother. In part this was because he had more time, managing to gain a second term as tribune for 122 BC without provoking any serious opposition. Many of his reforms were concerned with sharing the spoils of empire more widely. Caius confirmed his brother's legislation and extended his drive to restore the number of property-owning citizens by establishing a colony on the site of Carthage. He also won many supporters amongst the equestrian order by establishing a court to try senators accused of malpractice while serving as provincial governors (the *quaestio de rebus repetundis*) and forming the jury from equestrians. Up until this point a senator had only ever been tried by his peers. Less popular with Romans was Caius' move to extend citizenship to many more Latins and Italians, and his attempt to win a third term as tribune failed. From the beginning both Caius and his opponents were more prepared to employ intimidation and threats than anyone had been ten years before. Matters came to a head when a scuffle resulted in the death of one of the consul Opimius' servants. The Senate passed a decree – known to scholars as the *senatus consultum ultimum* (ultimate decree) due to a phrase used by Caesar, though it is not known what it was called at the time – calling upon the consul to defend the Republic by any means necessary. Normal law was suspended and the partisans of both sides armed themselves. Opimius added to his force a group of mercenary Cretan archers who were waiting just outside Rome, suggesting a degree of premeditation in his actions. Caius and his outnumbered supporters occupied the Temple of Diana on the Aventine Hill, but the consul refused all offers of negotiation and stormed the building. Gracchus died in the fighting and his head was brought to Opimius who had promised a reward of its weight in gold.[12]

We cannot know whether the Gracchi were genuine reformers desperate to solve what they saw as the Republic's problems, or ambitious men out solely to win massive popularity. Probably their motives were mixed, for it is hard to believe that a Roman senator could be unaware of the personal

advantages to be gained through such sweeping legislation. Regardless of their personal motivation they highlighted existing problems within society, most notably the plight of the many poor citizens, and the desire of those excluded from power, whether the equestrian order or the population of Italy, to have some greater share of it. The impact of the Gracchi's careers on public life was not immediate – the vast majority of tribunes continued to be elected for only a single term and political violence was rare – but it was to prove profound. In a system so reliant on precedent, many fundamental principles had been shattered. The brothers had shown how great influence, if temporary and somewhat precarious, could be obtained by appealing to the growing consciousness of social groups in a new way. It was only a question of time before someone else would possess both the initial prestige and the desire to emulate them. Things were not helped by the inertia of the Senate in dealing with the problems that the Gracchi had highlighted, and its preference for doing nothing, rather than allowing anyone to gain credit through providing a solution. On top of this, the closing decades of the second century were not distinguished by widespread competence and honesty on the part of many magistrates.

A dynastic struggle in the allied Kingdom of Numidia in North Africa resulted in a succession of scandals, as senators were bribed on a lavish scale to favour the claim of Jugurtha. The massacre of thousands of Roman and Italian traders at the town of Cirta caused outrage at Rome, forcing an army to be sent against Jugurtha, but the war was waged in a lethargic way and in 110 BC this force was defeated and surrendered to the enemy. A consul of greater ability was sent to take charge after this, but the whole episode had seriously damaged the faith of the wider population in the ability of the senatorial elite to lead. Exploiting this mood, Caius Marius campaigned for the consulship for 107 BC, contrasting himself, a tough and experienced soldier who had succeeded only through personal merit, with the scions of the noble houses who relied on their ancestors' glory rather than their own ability. Marius won comfortably and, through the aid of a tribune who passed a law in the Assembly to override the Senate's allocation of provinces, was given the command in Numidia. A further attempt to frustrate him came when the Senate refused to let him raise new legions to take to Africa, instead granting him permission only to take volunteers. Marius outmanoeuvred them by seeking volunteers from the poorest class, men not normally eligible for military service. It was an important stage in the transition from a militia army conscripted from a cross-section of the property-owning classes, to a professional army recruited overwhelmingly

from the very poor. The change was not instant, but its significance was to be deep and contributed much to the end of the Republic.[13]

Marius eventually won the war in Numidia by late 105 BC, but by this time the menace of the Cimbri and Teutones hung heavy over Italy. The early contacts with these tribes had again been marked by scandals and incompetence on the part of magistrates, many of them from the old established families. There was a strong feeling, evidently amongst the better off as well as the poor, for it was the former who dominated the voting in the *Comitia Centuriata*, that only Marius could be trusted to defeat the barbarians. This led to his unprecedented run of consulships, a far more serious breach of precedent than Caius Gracchus' consecutive tribunates. Saturninus and Glaucia offered support to Marius and at the same time hoped to capitalise on his success. In 103 BC Saturninus was tribune and passed a law granting land in North Africa to many of Marius' veterans from the war in Numidia. Caesar's father was one of the commissioners appointed to oversee the implementation of either this bill or more probably a similar one passed by Saturninus in 100 BC. The reliance on recruits from the poorest sections of society did mean that these men had no source of livelihood when they were discharged back to civilian life. Part of Saturninus' legislation in 100 BC was aimed at providing for the discharged soldiers of the operations against the Cimbri. Saturninus used the tribunate in much the same way as the Gracchi, bringing forward popular measures to distribute land, particularly land in the provinces, and renewing a measure that made wheat available to all citizens at a set price irrespective of the market. The latter had been introduced by Caius Gracchus, but abandoned after his death. Yet from the beginning Saturninus and Glaucia were less reputable than the Gracchi and far more inclined to resort to violence. In the end they went too far, losing the support of Marius who, acting under the Senate's ultimate decree just as Opimius had in 122 BC, led their suppression. The Republic into which Caesar was born was not coping well with some of the problems facing it.